

MARSOC Operational Approach For Modernization

Strategic shaping and reconnaissance

by Mr. David Pummell

The strategic environment is changing rapidly, and the joint force is modernizing to meet the challenges of future conflicts. We must be able to operate in a multi-domain environment and challenge the adversaries who are comfortable moving freely across the domains with increased confidence in their cyber and space capabilities. Capability in cyber and space multiplies lethality across the traditional air, land, and maritime domains.

The Commander for Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) recognizes the need for modernization which drives change across force employment, development, and design. MARSOC's operational approach for modernization is "Strategic Shaping and Reconnaissance" (SSR). This approach provides the cornerstone to design, develop, and employ a special operations force (SOF) prepared to meet the adversary or enemy across the domains with the confidence to deliver special operations effects that enable the joint force to win across the conflict continuum of cooperation, competition, and conflict.

The global dynamics are moving at a pace where nations must seize the initiative to ensure their values and projected influence are conveyed while the homeland remains protected. Through globalization, we are seeing global changes at a pace unseen in previous decades. Also affected by the COVID 19 pandemic, effects to industry and technology advance and evolve to meet

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Figure 1. Director of National Intelligence Global Trends 2040 Report. (Photo provided by author.)

the changing environment creating a degree of uncertainty in the world. Accomplishing the national defense requirements to meet these challenges modernization must at a minimum keep pace consistent with the global industry, technological advancement, and emerging threats.

Technology has proven to be a game-changer. It provides the means for com-

petitors or adversaries to become more assertive and enhance their influence globally supported by aggressive cyber and space activity. Historically, nations who mastered the maritime domain and provided freedom of navigation became great powers. Today, through technology, those that master the cyber and space domains are on the pathway to being the next global great powers.

This new era of strategic competition emphasizes relationships with allies and partners to maintain the global influence needed to dominate key terrain and keep the seas free to openly navigate protecting international commerce. Nations must assess and appreciate the contemporary environment. As the climate changes, regions become more accessible and new key terrain emerges; the Arctic is a prime example of how environmental change opens access to exploration and strategic natural resources previously inaccessible.

The threats to our national security, prosperity and democratic way of life are real and concerning. The behavior of adversarial countries directly threatens our way of life as they target our interests and values. The threats are categorized by risk, such as the high-risk threat of nuclear proliferation, and defined by the domain such as cyber-attacks on our infrastructure which threaten our

private information creating a vulnerable and insecure homeland.

Informed by History

The emerging global trends have created an operating environment that demands force modernization requiring innovative approaches from the joint force. Something new is usually best informed by history: "If you want a new idea, read an old book." This approach is beyond incorporating system

to 1980. During this time, Rhodesia had significant terrorist activity supported by the Soviet Union who intended to replace the European colonies in Africa. The Selous Scouts conducted a form of irregular warfare called "Pseudo Operations." They designed a force using special forces who managed small teams of former insurgents in support of the Rhodesian objectives. Selous Scout patrols infiltrated insurgent networks and moved among the population collecting

British Irregular Warfare and Special Operations

Around the same period, the British faced the challenges of irregular warfare in Northern Ireland. Again, many specialized units and operational approaches were developed unique to the threat and environment. One of the more unique units was the development of the 14th Intelligence Company, known as "The Det." The Det was comprised of the British Army Intelligence Corps and Special Forces operating in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and following decades. Over the years similar units operated under several names such as the Military Reaction Force, Special Reconnaissance Unit, Joint Command Unit Northern Ireland, and currently the Special Reconnaissance Regiment. Studying the force development and modernization of the Det provides a great example of how an assessment of the operating environment characterized as urban terrain and the threat assessed to be substantial and established terrorist network drives a force design to optimize effects against the threat.

The Det was designed and employed in a focused manner against a significant terrorist threat. The development of a selection process, unit training, and special equipment procurement and fielding provided an operational element that produced rapid and significant results. The Det is characterized by premier observation capabilities, individual stamina, endurance, and the cognitive ability to operate under stress. Priority was placed upon the primary ability to conduct close target reconnaissance utilizing a layered approach of collection means. The collection means included an array of signal intelligence, video, and audio collection systems with at the time state-of-the-art individual operational equipment and weapons. The success of the unit over a prolonged period can be attributed to its excellence in attention to detail, mastery of the basics, the highest standards for recruiting and training, and individual and collective operational experience.

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upgrades and fielding new equipment, it redesigns how we operate and comprehend the operating environment's opportunities and risks. This includes investing in the human domain where SOF is designed to thrive.

Looking to the past informs the future, lessons learned to provide great examples of both success and failure which must be part of the formula for both evolutionary and revolutionary change. A brief selection of special operations and irregular warfare case studies that inform a future operating concept are described in this article.

African Proxy Wars

During the 1970s through the 1990s, the continent of Africa remained a tinder box plagued by regional conflict influenced by great powers and their proxies. Based upon the nature of the conflict and the environment, forces had to develop and employ combat capability quickly to gain the initiative and produce positive effects. An excellent example of an irregular warfare approach was the Rhodesian Selous Scouts.

Pamwe Chete-All Together

The Selous Scouts was the creation of LtCol Ron Reid-Daly; he designed and employed a special operations unit drawn from talent within the Rhodesian Army and Special Branch operating from 1973

intelligence to find and fix the enemy so that a finishing force could attack the major insurgent camps and lines of communication. Because of the operational success of the Selous Scouts, the unit was expanded from three to six troops to provide additional capacity to sustain the operational and strategic effects achieved. The blend of special and intelligence operations proved to be an effective model for challenging counterinsurgency and counter-terrorist operations.¹

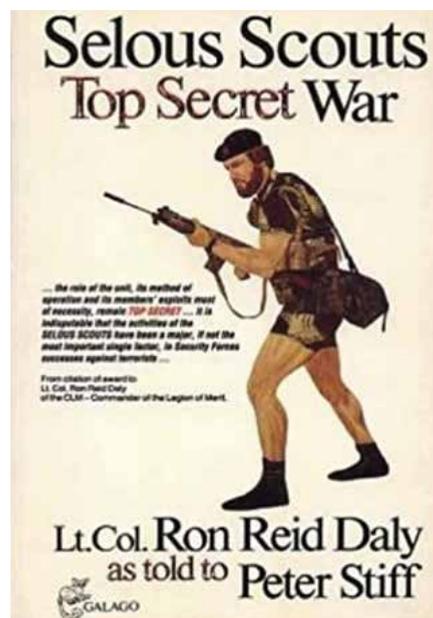


Figure 2. Book: Selous Scouts Top Secret War, LtCol Ron Reid Daly as told to Peter Stiff. (Photo provided by author.)

The United States and Cold War Strategic Reconnaissance

While many historical case studies



Figure 3. British Special Operations Forces Badges: Special Air Service, Special Reconnaissance Regiment, and Special Boat Service. (Photo provided by author.)

define the threat as a terrorist or non-state organization, the study is rounded by Cold War research. Appreciating the research starts following the successful models of the Office of Strategic Services and Special Operations Executive operating in World War II. The requirement for special operations conducting shaping and strategic reconnaissance operations continued in post-war Berlin, Germany. Supporting the Cold War operations, the United States provided a unit known as “Det A.” Operating primarily in Berlin and the surrounding area from 1956 to 1984, DET A was comprised of U.S. Army Special Forces who were tasked to conduct some of the most sensitive operations during the

Cold War. At the time, Berlin was divided into sectors with East Berlin being communist and West Berlin a showcase for freedom embracing post-war western influence and opportunities.

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Det A provides the operational model for special operations missions in support of strategic campaigning against the Soviet Union from 1956 to 1990.



Figure 4. Special Forces Berlin, Det A conducting airborne operations in a maritime environment. (Photo provided by author.)

Operating in the region they would work with allies and partners to develop both resilience and potential resistance if the tensions turned to conflict. Det A conducted a blend of strategic reconnaissance and operational preparation of the environment within their area of responsibility. They had the collective and individual capability to employ audio and visual collection devices, conduct Close Target Reconnaissance against strategic mobile targets and infrastructure providing the conventional force time and space to react to a large-scale conflict.²

“Across The Fence”: Cross Border Operations with MACV SOG

As we continue to assess the contemporary operating environment and the requirements of the joint force to operate globally against adversaries and enemies, researching the Military Assistance Command Vietnam Studies and Observations Group (MACV

SOG) provides significant value to the study. How MACV SOG operated during the Vietnam conflict provides lessons learned on operations conducted against the North Vietnamese from “across the fence” in Laos and Cambodia. These operations provided effects in the conventional operational areas by denying and frustrating the enemies cross border means of command and control, support infrastructure, and lines of communication. MACV SOG conducted a wide range of missions to include strategic reconnaissance, direct action, sabotage, counterintelligence, and bomb damage assessments. They conducted both maritime and land-based operations ranging from shaping and influence through radio broadcasts to sabotage on the enemy logistics systems running the length of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The MACV SOG strategic reconnaissance missions established the

current SOCOM Core Activity Special Reconnaissance through the Army's post-war special forces training and education programs.³

MARSOC Force Design, Development, and Employment for Emerging Threats

These historical case studies are critical examples that inform the development of new concepts and capabilities. It is also important to understand that these examples were successful in the analog age. How do we extract the elements of success and develop an operating concept for the digital age fully incorporating the complex environment connected across the globe with the ability to move large amounts of protected data at the speed of light? MARSOC completed an analysis of the current threats, operating environment, and emerging technologies. Combining the research with the priorities of the national strategies, the Commandant's and U.S. Special Operations Command Commander's guidance, MARSOC developed the SSR approach building upon the "analog age" legacy operations and activities of operational preparation of the environment (OPE) and special reconnaissance (SR).

JP 3-05, *Special Operations*, defines the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Core Activity SR as "Reconnaissance and surveillance actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or diplomatically and/or politically sensitive environments to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in conventional forces."⁴ An individual's understanding of SR is usually based upon personal experiences and training. It is normally associated with tactical actions in support of a short-term operation against a single target restricted within the boundary of a single area of operation. SR may involve observation from a static location in field conditions to mobile observation and targeting in an urban environment using unique tactics and equipment to blend in with the local population. Removing opinion and the wide variance of SR application based upon the abstract nature of the

action in the information and cyber domains.

Strategic Shaping and Reconnaissance defined: Those activities conducted by special operations elements in cooperation, competition, and conflict. SSR encompasses a wide array of skills employing SOF-specific equipment to provide shaping and influence effects. SSR is conducted through a hybrid approach utilizing selected SOF core activities and programs. Effects are achieved by reconnaissance and intelligence operations, and persistently developing regional relationships.

SSR globally distributes SOF elements with the ability to campaign across the conflict continuum conducting synchronized transregional operations and activities expanding the doctrinal application of SR and OPE supported by the entire range of SOF core activities and programs. SSR produces strategic effects to deter adversarial expansion and influence by assessing the region and applying the appropriate campaign elements.

SSR connects and synchronizes the global and theater-level priorities through the development of human, physical, and virtual infrastructure. MARSOC conducts operational support and sensitive activities for the joint force in areas with little to no DOD



Figure 5. MACV SOG Area of Operations. (Photo provided by author.)

activities, SR when reduced to the fundamental elements is the blend of special and intelligence operations designed to provide the supported commander the required capability.

SSR is designed to span the SR and OPE tasks with application in the multi-domain environment in which SOF increasingly operates. Additionally, SSR takes direct action and reframes it to look at new ways of accomplishing



Figure 6. Strategic Shaping and Reconnaissance. (Photo provided by author.)

presence or support. Developing regional support networks for future operations provides critical information that supports situational awareness, intelligence estimates, and cultural insight into regional norms and mores.

OPE is the conduct of activities in likely or potential operational areas to set conditions for mission execution.⁵ This provides the opportunity for the joint force to establish themselves in strategic areas in support of the national strategy. Optimal execution requires time—measured in years—to develop and strengthen relationships with allies and partners to accomplish integrated deterrence against adversarial malign activities.

OPE activities include observation, area and network familiarization, site surveys, assessments, and mapping the information environment across all domains. OPE may be conducted unilaterally or through the operational use of foreign individuals. OPE activities conducted to establish infrastructure may include developing areas in support of current special operations and anticipated reception, staging, and onward integration requirements for the joint force. OPE activities that support target development include reconnaissance, technical and physical surveillance, and target analysis.⁶

To accomplish the simultaneous OPE tasks within competition campaigning, SSR connects the DOD and intergovernmental nodes across the joint, interagency, international, multi-national enterprises to ensure clear communication and efficiency of action to accomplish the national priorities.

SSR provides unique capabilities to the joint force across the entire conflict continuum. When cooperation and competition fail MARSOC transitions to conflict in stride within the weapons engagement zone supporting the joint force through continued shaping and information requirements as forces move to conflict. Utilizing the multi-domain architectures established during competition SSR supports the joint force *kill webs* by functioning through the “sensor, system, shooter” logic—providing terminal guidance

for long-range precision fires, joint fires platforms, and cyber activities.⁷ The effects produced by SSR provide the joint force time and space to optimize lethality and maneuver against the enemy while increasing the survivability of the force.

The SSR operational approach takes the legacy SOF core activities and programs and evolves the concept of employment from a tactical mission of short duration against a single target to a globally synchronized shaping and

force and interagency partners to apply the appropriate whole of government approach to counter, deny, deter, or delay the adversarial intent and influence.

Marine Corps Value Proposition to the Joint Force and Naval Integration

The Marine Corps has an opportunity to support the joint force by connecting the stand in force to the outside force by shaping and preparing the littorals. MARSOC conducting special reconnaissance within the littorals

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reconnaissance campaign capitalizing upon the multi-domain capabilities focusing on multiple regions of influence and interest. This is accomplished by globally distributed and connected SOF deployments through both planned and opportunity deployments of varying duration to focus on the Geographic Combatant Commander (GCC) campaign priorities. Globally connecting the GCC priorities through forward deployed SOF Command and Liaison nodes illuminate and assess the competition threat threads projecting from adversarial near abroad locations. This action sets the conditions for the joint

provides the Joint Force Maritime Component Commander specific operational and intelligence preparation of the environment advantages. Through the multi domain lens, the littorals connect the domains and the land and maritime forces operating concepts.

Interdependence is the purposeful reliance of military forces and other partners on each other’s capabilities, authorities, and actions to maximize the complementary and reinforcing effects of all. Starting in the early stages of shaping interdependence maximizes the effects of the Marine Corps organic capabilities and synchronizes time,



Figure 7. MARSOC elements conduct SSR in the littoral environment. (Photo provided by author.)

phase, echelon, environment, domain, and proximity across the joint force.

This intentional interdependence facilitated early by SSR connects the Naval concept of “Advantage at Sea” integrating all-domain naval power and the Army concept for Multi-Domain Operations through the special operations service-like authorities and responsibilities.

While special reconnaissance conducted by SOF and amphibious reconnaissance conducted by the Marine Corps are tactically similar and conducted by highly trained and capable units, special reconnaissance differs by the condition and standard it is executed (e.g. politically sensitive, or strategic significance).⁸ SR is conducted with SOF peculiar authorities, programs, equipment and tactics, techniques, and procedures. Looking toward Marine Corps concepts such as Expeditionary Advance Base Operations and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment, there is an opportunity for a Marine Corps value proposition to the joint force. To establish the persistent forward presence MARSOC initiates SSR operations and activities in strategic areas to conduct shaping and reconnaissance that sets in motion the development of an initial operations architecture. At the appropriate time MARSOC maneuvers to the next area of interest meeting USSOCOM operational priorities to continue denying freedom of movement and influence on competitors and adversaries. As one option, the Marine Corps Recon-Counter Recon concept then provides additional capacity by conducting a relief in place with MARSOC to sustain the GCC integrated deterrence lines of effort to maximize effects along the entire adversary’s threat thread ranging from the near to far abroad.

The MARSOC SSR approach executed with the Marine Corps Force Design concepts provides the Service with a value proposition of increased awareness, lethality, and survivability to the joint force through a persistent forward presence across the multi-domains. Utilizing MARSOC from its position of advantage within the USSOCOM enterprise, it conducts Recon Pull for the Service at a global level.

Recommended Reading:

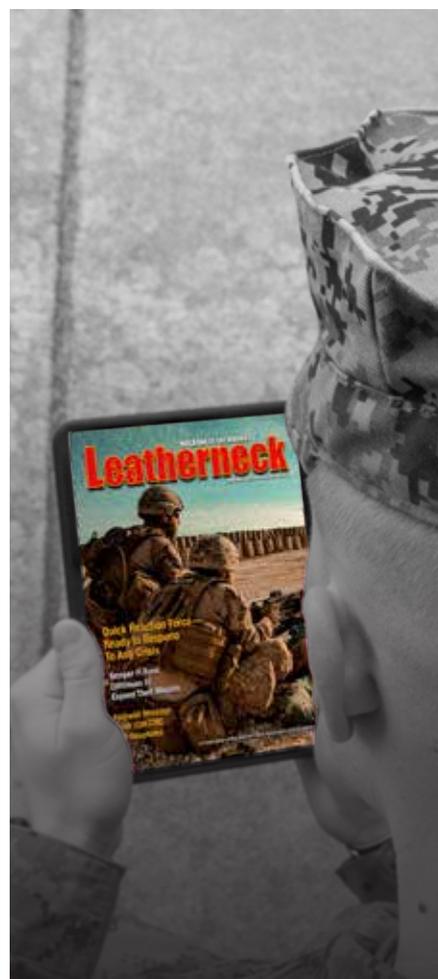
1. *Selous Scout: Top Secret War* by LtCol Ron Reid Daly.
2. *Special Forces Berlin: Clandestine Cold War Operations of the U.S. Army’s Elite 1956–1990* by James Stejskal.
3. *On the Ground; The Secret War in Vietnam* by John Stryker Meyer and John E. Peters.
4. *Special Reconnaissance and Advanced Small Unit Patrolling* by LtCol Ed Wolff.
5. *Kill Chain* by Christian Brose.
6. *Bandit Country* by Toby Harnden.

Notes

1. LtCol Ron Reid Daly, *Selous Scout Top Secret War*, (Alberton: Galag, 1983).
2. James Stejskal, *Special Forces Berlin: Clandestine Cold War Operations of the U.S. Army’s Elite, 1956–1990*, (Philadelphia, PA: Casemate, 2017).
3. John Stryker Meyer and John E. Peters, *On the Ground: The Secret War in Vietnam*, (SOG Chronicles, 2018).
4. Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations*, (Washington, DC: July 2014).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Christian Brose, *Kill Chain*, (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2020).
8. *Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations*.



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